

And I just can't look

"I'll always ask myself

When will this go away?"

william

I don't remember crossing the room.

One second, I'm staring at my phone, at the message sitting there like a lit fuse:

Dad:

I've spoken with the realtor. We're listing the house. It's time to move on. You should think about doing the same. No point keeping it empty. You're not living there. I'm not going back. I'll send you the paperwork. Don't make this difficult.

The house. Her house.

My mother's house. The place with the crumbling porch and the crooked windows. The kitchen where she taught me how to stir batter without spilling, how to arrange flowers without bruising the petals. The garden where she grew sunflowers so tall they blocked the neighbors' view, lilies that glowed white in the moonlight, violets that crept between the cracks of the path. Not a building.

A lung.

And he wants to sell it.

Something in my chest caved in the day she died. I thought there was nothing left to collapse.

I was wrong.

For a moment, all I can do is sit there at my dining table, hands flat against the wood, breath coming too fast. The apartment is too quiet. Too bright. The night outside is a black mirror, the city lights smearing themselves across the glass.

The next, I'm in the studio, yanking a fresh canvas off the stack so hard the others shudder and fan out like falling dominos.

I grab the biggest one—large, aggressive—and slam it onto the easel so hard the wood creaks. I don't prime it. I don't sketch. I don't think.

I just paint.

The realization—that he's really going to sell it, my mother's house, her kitchen with the blue tiles, her café on the ground floor, her stupid crooked garden gate—hits me

like a physical blow. I bend forward, elbows on my knees, and try to breathe through the wave of nausea.

He's going to erase her.

Not metaphorically. Not emotionally. Physically. Brick by brick. Shutter by shutter. Her handprints on the banister, her recipes taped to the inside of pantry doors, her handwriting on the labels of the spice jars.

All of it.

Gone.

"Move on." he'd written, like grief is a train schedule. Like there's a destination stamped on your ticket and you're the one holding up the line. My hands won't stop shaking.

I squeeze paint straight from the tubes. Cadmium yellow. Alizarin crimson. Phthalo blue. The caps hit the floor somewhere, rolling into corners, forgotten.

I load the palette knife until it groans with weight and drag it across the white.

A violent streak of cadmium yellow, thick and obscene, cuts through the center of the canvas like a wound.

Alizarin crimson bleeds into it, sinking, corrupting, blooming into something rotten and raw.

Phthalo blue slashes across the top like a scream, like storm clouds devouring the sun.

I attack the canvas with palette knives and my hands and the wrong end of brushes, smearing, scraping, layering until my fingers are caked and the smell of oil is so thick it burns my throat.

I paint the way the flowers felt in Lego's hands when they passed them to me each Wednesday—hopeful, desperate, a little foolish.

I paint the way Lego's smile cracked when I sent them away.

I paint the way Est looked at me when I said "I don't want to be alone anymore"—like I was something worth staying for, like I hadn't already failed everyone who'd ever tried. I paint the terror and the hunger and the guilt and the love I'm too scared to name.

I paint my mother's house without walls. Her café chairs floating in a void. Her favorite mug (the chipped sunflower one) melting into the floor. The mango tree in the garden uprooted, suspended upside down, its roots clawing at the sky.

I paint my father's new wife—just hands, always hands—peeling my mother's curtains off the windows, painting over her colors with safe, realtor-approved beige.

I paint until my arms shake and my vision tunnels and the canvas is no longer white but a violent, living thing.

When I finally step back, the room is spinning.

The painting is chaos. It is ugly and beautiful and true.

It is everything I have not said to Lego.

Everything I am terrified to say to Est.

Everything I never said to my mother before she slipped away behind a hospital screen.

I walk over, leaving smeared fingerprints of yellow and violet on the edge of the table. My hands are covered in paint—yellow on my fingers, purple on my palms. Like I'd been gardening. Like Lego's hands after a long shift.

I grab another canvas.

Slam. The easel protests, but I don't care. I'm past caring. Caring is a luxury for people whose lives aren't being slowly dismantled in text messages.

This time I reach for black. Ivory black. Mars black. I mix them with ultramarine until I get a blue so dark it could swallow sound. I smear it over the whole surface with my palm, the cold, oily drag of it grounding me for half a second. Then I punch holes through it with white—fists of light battering a night that won't move.

I scratch lines with my fingernails. With the back of a brush. With a rusty palette knife that should have been thrown out years ago. My hands sting. My knuckles split. Somewhere in the mess of color and solvent, I lose the boundary between skin and paint.

"In his work, I become perfect – and I feel just right."

Lego had said that once, years ago, laughing, while I adjusted the tilt of their chin. They'd flopped onto the sofa after a long day, hair loose and wild, cheeks flushed with sun. I'd been sketching them absentmindedly, unable to help myself.

In your work, I become perfect. they'd said. And I feel just right.

I feel the words now like a brand.

In my work, I make them perfect—Lego, my mother, even Est. In my work, I freeze their best angles, their softest light, their gentlest smiles. In my work, I turn them into saints and icons and anchors.

And then, in life, I push them away.

I push Lego out the door because I'm scared Est will see too much. I hide the truth from Est because I'm ashamed of how little I've done, how much I've avoided, how quickly I can become my father. I let the café emails rot in my inbox. I let the flower shop invoices stack up like accusations.

I paint until my forearm feels like it's full of broken glass.

Canvases blur into each other.

House.

Garden.

Mother.

Lego's hair as a dark curtain across their face.

Est's eyes, two points of impossible green in a field of gray.

My father's back, always his back, walking away down a corridor that never ends.

I don't think. If I think, I'll stop. If I stop, I'll feel.

At some point, I realize my knees hurt. Then I realize I'm on the floor, not sure when I sank down. I'm using my hands directly now, shoving paint around like wet earth.

The canvas before me looks like a heart breaking open.

It looks like Lego's shocked face when I said "I'm busy right now."

It looks like my mother's eyes the last time she saw me and tried to memorize my face.

It looks like Est, that night in the studio, hugging me while I shook and pretending not to notice my tears soaking his shirt.

Please don't go. I don't know how to be a person without you.

My phone buzzes on the worktable.

The sound slices through the heavy air like a blade.

I flinch.

I walk over, paint cracking in flakes from my knuckles—yellow on my fingers, purple on my palm. Like I've been gardening. Like Lego's hands after repotting the violets my mother left behind.

The screen lights up with my father's name again.

Dad:

Realtor asked if we can repaint before listing. You know that blue in the kitchen was always too much.

Better to neutralize.

Neutralize.

Like my mother's choices were a stain that needed bleaching. Like her life was a problem to be sanded and smoothed before strangers walked through it with their shoes on.

I taste metal. Realize I've bitten my tongue.

Another buzz.

Dad:

You should let go, William. This isn't healthy.

I slam the phone face-down on the table.

Another canvas. I drag it up with hands that barely feel like mine anymore.

I just paint.

Cadmium yellow again, straight from the tube, thick and obscene, like some defiant middle finger to his obsession with "neutral."

Alizarin crimson bleeding into it like a wound that won't close.

Phthalo blue slashed across the top like the storm that should have knocked the whole damn house down years ago but left it standing, just so he could sell it now.

I paint until my shoulder feels like it might tear. Until my breath comes in ragged pulls. Until my chest aches with the weight of every word I've never said.

You act like you're the only one who lost her.

You left the house before I did.

You remarried while her hospital bed was still warm.

The words never made it past my lips. They make it onto the canvas instead.

I attack the surface with palette knives and my hands and the wrong end of brushes, smearing, scraping, gouging lines so hard the linen protests. I hear fabric

strain, a whine beneath the wet assault.

I paint my mother's café chairs upside down, their legs like broken bones. I paint Lego's Wednesday flowers wilting in their vase because no one watered them this week. I paint Est at my door, standing just outside the threshold, waiting for me to invite him in and not knowing if I can.

I paint absence.

I paint light.

I paint everything in between.

And somewhere in the frenzy, something breaks—not just in the canvas, but in me.

For the first time in years, I am alone.

Not alone as in no one around—I've had that kind of alone for a long time. I mean alone as in: no pretense, no performance, no curated version of myself for others to orbit. No "reclusive genius" shtick, no careful, controlled grief. Just me.

A man in a room, covered in paint and memories and other people's expectations.

For the first time in three years, I'm not painting at the world. I'm not making statements or trying to be profound. I'm not thinking about critics or curators or the line outside the gallery.

I'm painting with the world. With the chaos in my chest. With everything I've refused to feel.

I paint until my arm burns. I paint until the smell of oil and sweat fills the room, clinging to the back of my throat. I paint until the buzzing in my head slows down to a dull, exhausted hum.

Time stops meaning anything.

An hour.

Three hours.

A night.

A lifetime.

At some point, I drop the brush. It clatters to the floor, leaving a comet tail of black behind it.

I step back.

There are four new canvases. Five? Six? I can't tell where one emotion ends and the

next begins. The studio is a battlefield—rags, tubes, streaks of color on the wall where my aim was off.

The canvas directly in front of me is a riot of color. It is aggressive and beautiful and sad and hopeful all at once. It looks like a heart breaking open.

It looks like Lego.

Not literally. There's no face. No hair. No body. Just color—the yellow of their favorite hoodie, the deep magenta of the bruises they thought I didn't see, the green of the plants they nursed back to life in my apartment.

I stare at it, my chest rising and falling.

My phone buzzes again. I flinch like I've been hit.

For a second, I imagine it's my father again. Another instruction. Another command to "move on."

But when I pick it up and wipe a smear of blue from the screen, it's not.

It's Est.

The words punch a hole clean through me.

I sink to the floor in front of the painting, phone clenched in one paint-slick hand, the other hanging uselessly at my side.

The city lights flicker outside like they're trying to speak to me. Morse code in neon.

The painting stares back at me, wet and wild and unfinished.

Just like me.

I stare at Est's message.

The excitement, the pride, then the confusion, then that quiet, familiar hurt I've already seen too many times.

I could type I'm sorry. I could type I don't know how to be this person everyone thinks I am and still be yours, too.

Instead, my fingers hover over the keyboard, frozen.

I stay there until dawn creeps in, pale and forgiving, painting soft gold across the violent colors.

And for the first time in three years, I don't cover the canvas.

I don't turn it to the wall. I don't drape it in cloth like a body I'm not ready to mourn.

I leave it out.

Raw.

Exposed.

Alive.

Because maybe that's what coming back to life looks like.

Messy.

Terrifying.

Not contained.

I stand up, my legs trembling. My body hurts in ways that feel earned.

Paint is drying on my skin. Yellow in the lines of my palms. Red in the half-moons of my nails. Blue on my forearms where I pressed against the canvas to steady myself.

I look at the paintings again—these fractured, frantic things.

They're not the work I thought I'd make for Absence & Light.

They're better.

They're true.

"In his work, I become perfect – and I feel just right."

Lego's words echo in my skull, warm and aching.

Maybe perfection was never the point. Maybe feeling just right sometimes means being seen in all your ugliness. Your anger. Your fear. Your love.

Maybe if I can paint that, I can learn to live it.

I pick up the phone again. My father's thread stares at me, unread, unfinished.

I mute it.

Outside, the city roars into another day. Cars. Voices. The never-ending grind.

In here, in my small, paint-choked studio, something fragile and stubborn chooses not to die.

I walk back to the largest canvas—the one that looks like Lego and my mother and Est and a house that doesn't exist anymore.

For the first time, I allow myself to think:



This might be enough.

Not perfect.

Not fixed.

But enough.

Enough to start again.

Enough to rebuild.

Enough to call this pain what it is and stop pretending it's noble.

I touch the edge of the canvas lightly, my fingers resting on a streak of yellow.

"Okay." I whisper, to my mother, to Lego, to Est, to myself. "Okay. I'll try."

And this time, I mean it.